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The Hand of the Potter

A Tragedy in Four Acts

by

THEODORE DREISER



History of the Play

Written in the fall of 1916. Accepted for production by Arthur Hopkins, New York, Dec., 1916. Production scheme delayed and finally abandoned April, 1917. Rejected for publication in book form by the John Lane Publishing Company—the author's publishers at that time—April, 1917. Reason, "too grim." The author severs his connections with that company. Accepted for publication in book form by Boni & Liveright, New York, May, 1917. Book publication delayed to accommodate managers. Accepted for production as a play by the Coburns, August, 1918. Book production delayed to accommodate the Coburns. Production by the Coburns abandoned December, 1918. Finally issued in book form by Boni & Liveright (New York), April, 1919.

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The Hand of the Potter

Reviewed by George Jean Nathan in the Smart Set.

It is called "*The Hand of the Potter.*" Announced for production by the Coburns, it remains still between book covers. Arthur Hopkins has said that it is the best American play that has been submitted to him and that he would eagerly have produced it had not Dreiser imposed upon him so many bulls, caveats and salvos. Mencken, Dreiser's most faithful critical mount, private shimmy dancer and rajpoot at large, says that Hopkins is crazy and that it is one of the worst American plays he has read. Burton Rascoe, Chicago's leading journalistic professor of the arts, informs me that it has made a considerable impression upon him; Tarquinius Ramgunga Smith, erudite *sposo* to the *Century*, has said the same; the theatrical producers, aside from Hopkins, to whom the manuscript was submitted have observed that it is, in their estimation, largely whim-wham. It has given birth to boisterous palms pounders, tin-sheet shakers and shillabers on the right hand, and to nose wrinklers, tongue stickers and loud sneezers on the left. I find myself occupying a position in

no-man's land stretching between the two camps—but rather far to the left.

The story of a victim of a certain phase of Kraft-Ebbing demoralization—one has a sneaking suspicion that the late Leo Frank case may in a general way have suggested the theme to the author—Dreiser has written a play whose chief merit (as it is ever one of Dreiser's most notable assets) consists in the achievement, in the very teeth of life's low derisory comedy, of a poignant and tragic pity. This deep compassion, this summoning forth, honestly and soundly, of forbearance, this is the note Dreiser can strike as few other Americans can strike it. Out of the tin of the grotesque, the ignoble and the mean, he can evoke the golden E flat of human frailty and charity as few modern Europeans can evoke it. And yet with never a suspicion of the bogus "heart interest" that passes promiscuously for the currency of art, with never a suspicion of slyly studied fact blue-penciling or of self-compromise. From "Sister Carrie" down through "Jennie Gerhardt" and, with but a few skips, on to "Twelve Men," one encounters always this grim and understanding heart upon a hilltop, at once moved and immobile, at once condemning and forgiving: without sentimentality as without imper-

turbation. You will find it, perhaps at its most eloquent, in his chapter, "My Brother Paul"—"And you, my good brother! Here is the story that you wanted me to write, this little testimony to your memory, a pale, pale symbol of all I think and feel"—a really first-rate, immensely realistic and effecting arrangement of the jigsaw of the eternal marriage of the ridiculous and the gentle. And though the amalgam of heart and eye, the one warm and the other cold, dresses his play not so convincingly, it is yet there to breathe into the work a something that in its absence would have left the play a mere third-rate Third Avenue melodramatic mossback diddler not much above the quality of such dime magnets of yesterday as "Devil's Island."

The dramatist Dreiser is the precocious bad boy of the novelist Dreiser: that offspring of the artist who looks upon the stage as a neighbour's apple orchard wherein to penetrate by night enveloped in a bed-spread, scare off with sepulchral groans the watchful Spitz, and make away with the pippins. The bed-spread and the groans are apparent (Dreiser has doubtless grown tired of waiting and wishes to "knock 'em off their seats" now or never) in this, his first long play. The girl

stretched out in the coffin, the fourth dimensional dramaturgy with its divers laughing gases, the violent sensationalism of the defloration of eleven year old Kitty Neafie by the degenerate Berchansky—this is the crescendo Dreiser box-office attack; the last in particular the do-or-die dive against the Rialto show pews. And what is more, if the Coburns put on the play down in the Greenwich Village Theater—away from Broadway—I somehow feel that its scandalous air will presently draw to it enough of jay Broadway to make Dreiser the money upon which he had his eye when he wrote it. For that Dreiser wrote the play with a Rolls-Royce in view seems to me as certain as that he writes his novels with nothing in view but the novels.

"The Hand of the Potter" has three extremely effective theatrical scenes; the attack scene at the conclusion of the first act (in effect similar to the scene at the conclusion of the first act of a prize play of twenty years ago called "Chivalry"); the scene in the second act wherein the suspicions and fears of the mother and father of the demented boy tremble upon their lips; and the scene wherein the crazed, pursued pervert closes the door against the child Hagar and demoniac temptation. I am probably unfair to Deiser when I bluntly characterize these scenes as mere stage melodrama: there is something more to them than merely that. But that they were initially conceived less for their intrinsic relevance and integrity than for their more obvious yokel-power, I somehow can't disbelieve, for all the well-known stubborn and eccentric hand that executed them, must have taken on at least a show of the reticence that is currently nowhere visible.

The balance of the manuscript reveals here and there a touch or two of moderately good characterization, but little

more. The structure of the play is disjointed and awkward. The third act, jumping a la Hal Reid from the Berchansky flat to the grand jury room of the Criminal Courts Building, invades the continuity of the action: the third act might better have followed up the action of the preceding act after a slight lapse of time, in the locale of that act. The long monologues of the insane boy, though logical and sound enough, are repetitious and tiresome. The German dialect of such a straight character as Emil Daubenspeck—"ich vuss by a liddle chob in Sixty-fift' Sthreet und vuss going down troo der lot by Fairst Affenoo back of mein house da"—smacks rebelliously of Sam Bernard, as the "I can't give you her exack langwidge . . . she was kinda nervous an' a-fidgitin' with 'her hands this-a-way" of such a straight character as Rufus Bush smacks of William Hodge and as the Irish McKagg's "devil a bits" and "sure, ye'll be after sayin's" suggest the Russell Brothers and the Yiddish Berchansky's "oi, oi's," "ach's" and sedulous use of the "v" sound suggest Ben Welch.

The play, in brief, though probably a financial success if handled with a sufficiently cunning showmanship, falls short on a score of counts. It has a touch of the great and gorgeous pity; it has twenty touches of the great and gorgeous whangdoodle. It belongs very largely to the Dreiser who writes for the Saturday Evening Post and goes to see Henry B. Walthall in the moving pictures; it is not the work of the Theodore Dreiser who has written some of America's finest novels. *That* Dreiser could never seriously have written such an idiotic scene, for example, as that of the newspaper reporters' colloquy in the last act: not unless he appreciated the idiocy of a Broadway theatrical audience as well as I.

Reviewed by Ludwig Lewisohn in The Nation.

The proper character of the tragic hero has long been a fruitful subject of critical controversy. One recalls the old formula of the schools: he must not be ignoble, he must not be guiltless, he must occupy a reasonably important station in human society. In brief, he must be *Œdipus*, *Macbeth*, *Wallenstein*. Let us look at Mr. Dreiser's protagonist. Isador Berchansky is the son of a Jewish peddler of thread and needles. He was born in an East Side slum. There were ten children. Four are dead. Of the six who survive four are normally energetic and decent people. But poor little Masha (who has

the most sensitive soul) is a cripple, and Isadore a psychopathic degenerate. Twice, then, the hand of the Potter shook. From the point of view of the police records Isadore is a loathsome criminal. But in Mr. Dreiser's portrayal of him his struggle against his ghastly infirmity is not wholly ignoble; his guilt is merged into social and, in the last analysis, into cosmic forces; his importance is in his character as representative of the tragic consequence of

ignorance, poverty, and oppression. He is not ignoble, he is not guiltless; he is important. To realize thoroughly the new meanings that here attach to the old form of words is to have grasped the fundamental change in thinking about human life which is the very soul of the age in which we live, an age in which so many new things are still known by old words and consequently hardly known at all. For it is not only the political map of the world that we must study anew. Ethical frontiers are also subtly shifting before our eyes.

Mr. Dreiser's dramaturgic structure is a little clumsy, a little awkward and helpless. The fourth act is plainly unnecessary. But in the three preceding acts there is such characterization and such a projection of the interplay of character through dialogue as we shall seek in vain in any other American play. The delineation of

the Berchansky family is not less than masterly. The brothers and sisters could have been but of one blood; they could have been the children of no one but these parents; yet each is, in addition, a definite and peculiar personality. Best of all is the father, Aaron Berchansky. Mr. Dreiser, as he showed in the character of old Gerhardt, has always had a deep sense of the pathos of old age, of a genuine if rigid righteousness that has lost the battle and is stricken at the evidence that righteousness alone avails so little against the vast forces of the world. Berchansky, assuredly, has a tragic quality and appeal that belong to no age. He has them when he turns to the District Attorney: "If I had been a better fader maybe dis would not happen;" he has them, above all, when he silences the nagging landlord in words as characteristic as they are beautiful: "Vy pull at de valls of my house? Dey are already down!"

Reviewed by Constance Black in the Baltimore Sun.

In his grimly tragic play entitled "The Hand of the Potter" (Boni & Live-right) Theodore Dreiser has taken the sort of theme which the newspapers of any great city furnish every day. But he has dealt with it in such masterly fashion as to produce a tragedy which is singularly moving and affecting—a tragedy of the righteous forsaken. A degenerate boy has assaulted a little girl and been sent to prison. Upon release he assaults and kills another little girl, then flees and hides and, eventually, commits suicide. He is depicted as a congenial defective, incapable of mastering his impulses, yet with many qualities of kindness and with desire to do the right thing. His father and mother and sisters are the chief characters and are masterly

depicted. The old father, particularly, one cannot soon forget. He has tried so hard to do his best. He has sought to bring his children up as they should be brought up, but poverty and New York streets have proved too much for him. His efforts are unavailing and the walls of his house topple down upon him. Mr. Dreiser spoils the effect of his play somewhat by the too-

lengthy dialogue between the newspaper reporters in his last act—an act not really necessary in any case. But this play is certainly the sort of thing American literature needs as a reaction against the Pollyanna school of art. A homely tragedy. The sort of thing which happens every day, yet given an eternal value by being dealt with grimly and vitally. One may feel

that the life of the average man is too short for him to give his time to concern with one tragic experience out of all the millions of tragic experiences which every day brings to the sons of men. And one

may feel that Mr. Dreiser sees life somewhat lopsidedly. But all art and all artists down the ages have been open to such criticism. "The Hand of the Potter" is literature. And we need literature.

Reviewed by C. A. in the *Washington Star*.

Theodore Dreiser here makes use of a four-act play to crystallize the tragedy of a pervert. An east-side Jewish boy—Isadore Berchansky—set upon by himself and goaded to desperation by the sex-lure of the open streets, runs amuck, and in his madness makes a little neighbor girl his victim. The missing girl, the finding of her body, the man hunt, the dawning fear of the Berchansky family that Isadore might have done this thing, their pathetic efforts to deceive themselves and others, their examination in the courtroom—these are the steps by which the play rises to its climax, when Isadore—starved, hiding, hunted, hated—slips finally out and away through the friendly offices of an open gas jet and an arm's length of rubber tubing.

That is the play. Without an extra word and with never a stepping aside from the straight course of stark portrayal, the author, with a new austerity of spirit, in a rigid economy of gesture, sets the hideous thing out nakedly. Is it a reform performance? Not at all. If reforming measures should come out of this play, they will come by virtue of the fact that readers must get together for their own peace of mind to help the unfortunate. Dreiser is not thinking about social amel-

ioration—that is, not to the extent of deforming his play. He is tremendously busy painting the thing as it is. And how helpless one is, after all. What is it about? What is one's own part? What can he do? What are the forces—sinister and beneficent—that mix themselves so inextricably in each one of us? A terrible play—and terrible because it impels one to look into his own depths and because it leads him to realize his own nothingness in the hidden motives of the grand whole.

Reviewed by Ralph F. Holmes in the *Detroit Tribune*.

Theodore Dreiser has let himself in for another drubbing by the publication, through Boni & Liveright, of a four-act play entitled "The Hand of the Potter." And the defenders of Mr. Dreiser, if I mistake not, are going to be few in number and feeble in voice, for he has written a play which is not only unimaginable on the stage but almost impossible to read, so grim, so hideous and so true it is.

It is one thing to tell the story of a girl who triumphs over her surroundings at the expense of what the world likes to call the moral self, to picture the financial rapacity of a man of wealth, the amorous adventures of a man of genius—these things are not only true but they are typical. But it is quite another to go down into the dark and fearsome depths of abnormal psychology and bring forth to view on the printed page the tragedy of an ill-born youth who commits the most unspeakable of social offenses, the attack upon children.

This is the kind of horror with which newspapers willingly harrow the hearts of eager readers whenever the opportunity offers, but that it constitutes legitimate

material for the artist is going to be hotly denied, and by many who would resent being classed as conservative critics.

Any review which a commentator at-

tempts to offer of this book must be regarded almost as a warning, for I think it is frankly the duty of the reviewer, in this case, to strive as far as possible to prevent the book falling into the hands of anyone unprepared to receive it, quite as much as it is his duty to urge it into the hands of all who have staunch hearts in their contemplation of life, and that high degree of optimism which does not flinch or despair at the naked truth.

Not long since we quoted in this column those words of the dying Othello, which might be taken as life's admonition to the artist:

Speak of me as I am, nothing extenuate,
Nor set down aught in malice.

And it is by this text which the apologist for Mr. Dreiser must vindicate his right to offer the world such a drama as "The Hand of the Potter."

Until it can be proven that Mr. Dreiser has distorted his picture, or has moved his drama to illogical denouement, or has failed to inform his subject with some of that elusive quality which transforms mere facts into truths of universal significance, the utmost that his detractors in this instance can say is that "The Hand of the Potter" is too terrible to read or witness.

In order that you may judge fairly for yourself at least whether you care to attempt the book, let me tell you what the dramatist has done.

He has, in the first place, offered us a philosophical starting point (which was undoubtedly his own) in quoting the words of Omar: "What did the Hand then of the Potter shake?" Then he has raised the curtain on an unforgettable picture.

It is the lower East Side, in New York, where in a sweltering tenement live the Berchanskys, a poor thread peddler, his faded wife and three children, a son and two daughters. There is a third daughter, who is well married, and presently there comes into the scene a second son, who has but recently been paroled from prison,

where he was sentenced because of an attack upon a 10 year old girl.

He is afflicted with a twitching shoulder and bears other unmistakable evidences of sexual and psychological abnormality that in a less sentimental and more intelligent community would long since have placed him under restraint. But here he is again "paroled" into a world that offers the maximum of temptation to such a nature as his, where the frankly revelatory garb of the women, harmless and healthful enough for the normal, at the same time vexes him with impulses beyond endurance.

The inevitable happens. An 11 years old girl comes into the room where this youth has been left alone; she moves him to a frenzy, and the sorrow-ridden little family return from a breathing spell in the park to find only the evidences of the crime that fit with too dreadful accuracy into the discovery of the child's body in a field a few hours later.

That requires two acts, and there follow two more—the grand jury room and the cheap lodging where, some weeks later, the hunted, haunted boy summons just enough self-control to thrust another child out of his room and then puts a gas tube in his mouth.

From the point of view of sheer workmanship, Mr. Dreiser has done this beautifully. The old father's indictment of himself on the witness stand as having failed of his patriarchal duties, the frenzied lying of the mother, the tawdry cheapness of the worldly daughter, the last mad agonies of the boy—these are done with the same masterful hand that made "The Girl in the Coffin" not only the greatest one-act play written by an American, but one of the greatest American dramas of any length.

But what more can one say for "The Hand of the Potter?" Nothing I fear—save only to warn those who are too quick to attack Mr. Dreiser to pause and consider if, after all, their indictment is not of the dramatist, but of life.

Reviewed by Belford Forrest in the *Knickerbocker Press* (Albany).

If the Coburns screw their courage to the sticking point and do actually produce "The Hand of the Potter," there will be one grand and glorious shindy. Just at present they are busy scooping a fortune out of "The Better

'Ole." In the meantime, to give everybody a chance to tune up for the big noise later, Dreiser has printed the play. And sure enough the fun has started. It has been greeted with a perfect babel of alleluias and anathemas. George Jean Nathan, in the October number of the *Smart Set*, gives a particularly rollicking account of its reception. Arthur Hopkins, for instance, considers it the best American play that has been submitted to him and would certainly have produced it had not Dreiser imposed upon him so many "bulls, caveats and salvos." On the other hand, Mencken, Nathan's partner

in crime and Dreiser's man at arms these many years, says that Hopkins is crazy, and that it is one of the worst American plays he has read. "It has given birth," Nathan writes, to boisterous palm pounders, tin-sheet shakers and shillabers on the right hand, and to nose wrinklers, tongue stickers and loud sneezers on the left. I find myself occupying a position in the no man's land stretching between the two camps—but rather far to the left." Many readers of the play will no doubt share Nathan's uncertainty, and face both ways. With characteristic courage Dreiser has tackled a dreadful theme. Young Isadore Berchansky is a born degenerate and he commits a fiendish crime. Dreiser tells his story to prove that the boy is neither a fiend nor a criminal, but the helpless victim of heredity and environment. The first and second acts in the Berchansky home are masterly. We find it difficult to believe that they can fail to be effective in the highest degree upon the stage. Particularly the awful climax to the first act

and the scene at the close of the second in which the old people realize that the crime has been committed by Isadore. And Dreiser has surely never done anything better than his characterization of the Berchansky family. The third act, in which the scene shifts to the courtroom, may act more convincingly than it reads. Isadore's death scene in the fourth act is too long drawn out. But it is utterly pathetic. Moreover, it is the logical conclusion of the play. The debate between the newspaper men in the scene that follows is an anti-climax of the worst description. The purpose of this play is clear as daylight without any such tub-thumping. The fact that "The Hand of the Potter" is Dreiser's first long play is probably responsible for the over-emphasis that mars the concluding scenes. There is so much that is truly great in the whole conception, so many flashes of unmistakable genius, such genuine tragedy, that its technical imperfections are, in comparison, trifles light as air.

THE HAND OF THE POTTER

If you believe that the merit or lack of merit of a work is to be readily detected by any or all, examine these contrasting reviews.

Theodore Dreiser can be depended upon to send forth an unusual book. All his works are unusual. The morals of his novels have been harshly criticized, but he who proclaims them weak and meaningless is yet to be heard. His latest production, "The Hand of the Potter," will be hard to pillory for moral reasons. It is a tragedy in the form of a play, grim and gaunt, without an unnecessary word or character. The character around which the plot revolves is the degenerate son of an East Side Jewish family. Here is stark realism from first to last, and presented so grippingly that one does not lay down the book unfinished.—*Times-Star*, Cincinnati.

"If Mr. Dreiser had written nothing else this would establish his reputation as a writer of power."—*Star*, Indianapolis.

"Artistically he has made great strides. 'The Girl in the Coffin' foreshadowed a care for technique which 'The Hand of the Potter' has nearly perfected. It is an artistic accomplishment, in addition to its moral sincerity."—*News*, Detroit.

"It is a tragedy of New York's East Side, badly pictured, horror heaped on horror, distress on distress, a chief character, that of a degenerate and partially demented young man who finally kills himself, yet the whole, withal, permeated with much pathos and tenderness amid squalor and depravity."—*Dispatch*, Pittsburgh.

"It is a powerful plea for enlightened treatment of moral defectives, who come from the hand of the potter unfit and unable to withstand the temptations with which they are surrounded."—*Times*, Los Angeles.

The Hand of the Potter, by Theodore Dreiser, a tragedy in four acts (New York, Boni & Liveright), should suffice, by its incredibly inept construction, to remove the last doubt whether the author is capable of mastering any existing technique. Upon an authentic background of East Side family life he has presented a courageous and understanding picture of a certain kind of erotic pathology—and then has squandered his materials in a sensational plot that is as clumsy as melodrama as it is arbitrary as tragedy.—*The Dial*, N. Y.

"It is weak melodrama, lacking plot, devoid of structure, without feeling and imagination and without any discernible trace of literary or dramatic value."—*Chronicle*, San Francisco.

"Why is 'The Hand of the Potter?' The play is one of the most appallingly repulsive plays ever written, not alone for its subject, but because it has been clumsily and awkwardly treated. The author not only reveals himself as a violator of the rules of good taste, but as a crude worker in the art of dramatic construction. After reading it one might with equal disgust and indignation ask, 'Why is Theodore Dreiser?'"—*Journal*, Providence, R. I.

"The whole thing reads like a collection of extracts from penny dreadfuls and official police records. Of dramatic structure it exhibits no trace. That it contains bait that might be attractive to one sort of audience is likely enough, but nothing in it is worthy of preservation in print."—*Evening Post*, New York.

"The only possible result of this play is a maudlin sentimentality, from which (and we speak reverently) may heaven deliver us."—*Oregonian*, Portland, Ore.

"Those who hold that the purpose of art is merely to entertain, will conclude there is no art here; but those who believe that the purpose of art is to uplift, will find that the story qualifies for that category."—*Gazette Times*, Pittsburgh.

"His attitude is always that of the kindly surgeon, tender, but true to his scalpel. Naturally, his methods are not altogether relished by those persons who wear their morals on their sleeves and who think that the proper course with evils is not open minded discussion, but festering silence."—*Evening Wisconsin*, Milwaukee.

"There is here a fidelity to nature which is apparent in the works of few American writers."—*Gazette Times*, Pittsburgh.

"It is exceedingly fortunate for the intelligent reader, and especially for the American reader whose pride is a tremble lest the Pollyanna-Freckles type of literature come to be regarded as representative of the American standard, that Mr. Dreiser is imperturbably impervious to any disapproval aimed at making him cease to reflect life as he sees it. If he were not, he would never have had the temerity to write *"The Hand of the Potter,"* and American literature would have been the poorer by what is certainly one of the strongest plays it has so far known."—B. C. S., *New York American*.

"Here is as strong a picture as Ibsen ever painted. It is literature. It is one of those human documents which will interpret for future ages the horror of the closing years of a putrescent civilization that fell of its own decomposing stupidity."—*World*, Oakland, California.

"As a thesis the play merits the closest consideration for its concrete suggestions and deep penetration into the subject. As a tragedy, it rises to the greatest heights of pathos and sinks into abyssal sorrows. There are only a few shortcomings in the construction of the play, which, once eliminated, would materially strengthen it."—*East Side News*, New York.

"We cannot hold the family accountable for his lust and murder; or him—we have not as yet provided the precautionary machinery for eliminating what Dreiser describes with so damning realism—that's all."—W. P. B., *Post-Standard*, Syracuse.

"But as a reading play—ugh! I can't imagine anyone with a sense of art, choosing as a subject for a drama a raper and a murderer of little girls. Science may deal with perversions of sex, but surely we needn't be asked to read plays about them. If I were a censor I would bar *'The Hand of the Potter'* from circulation and turn Mr. Dreiser over to the psychiatric ward."—*Tribune*, Chicago.

"The author treats his subject ignobly. He is not the surgeon applying himself to the diseased body to cut away the faulty tissue; he is not the priest, come to soothe the soul. He is the morbidly curious bystander, removing the cover to view the wounds. The true artist does not work so. There is an effect—in the case of a master—of his removing his hat reverently when he stands in the presence of suffering. Mr. Dreiser would seem to be holding a magnifying glass in one hand and a note book in the other. And in the end there is the effect not of his having given pity to the ailing, but of having brought an unsavory mess to view."—*Republic*, St. Louis.

"The work is good—we do not deny it. There is about it a dark and sullen excellence. What we question is the necessity of it. And without a necessity, it should not have been written."—*News*, Chicago.

"Is anyone going to admit Dreiser's right to his choice of material? *'The Hand of the Potter'* is a study of one of the most revolting types of mental degeneracy that society has to meet. Is such a subject material for art?"—*News*, Detroit.

"This play is classed by its publishers as a tragedy. It is, indeed, a tragedy that any writer of Theodore Dreiser's technical attainments should be so warped in his outlook as to regard the theme of this play as a fit subject for anything except a medical treatise."—*The Outlook*, New York.

"Ardent, and often virulent, friends of his assert that his bigness lies in his choice of themes and it is these which make him worth reading. Perhaps. To the thoughtless, who inquire, must such things be paraded? Mr. Dreiser reiterates in varying manner from time to time, they must! One will grant their broad truth, also their artistic truth, but why make fetishes of them?"—*Transcript*, Boston.

"Realism has its place in the novel and the drama, but there are limits which decency and good taste set up to guide the writer and to protect the public. It is to be regretted that Mr. Dreiser displays a fondness for the exploitation of the seamy side of human intercourse."—*Times*, Trenton, N. J.

AND THEN THESE FROM LETTERS

MEDICAL REVIEW OF REVIEWS
206 Broadway
New York

Mr. Theodore Dreiser,
165 West 10th Street,
New York City.

December 28th, 1917.

Dear Mr. Dreiser:

"I have read with the greatest interest and care *The Hand of the Potter*. I consider it a perfect piece of work artistically, and believe it will accomplish much good in that it will bring about a more sympathetic attitude, not only toward those unfortunates who commit crimes because of insanity, but for any other reason.

"I am writing this note to advise you that I am perfectly willing and eager to urge the *Medical Review of Reviews* and its *Sociological Fund* to co-operate with *Mr. Hopkins* in putting this play before the American people and to have it produced under their joint auspices.

"Very sincerely yours,

"FREDERIC H. ROBINSON."

"I am a Jew and this is my favorite of all Jewish plays."—Samuel Chugerman.

"It is a great play. I cannot get it out of my mind."—Arthur Hopkins.

"The play is very strong. I am sorry it offers me no suitable roll."—Arnold Daly.

"We consider this a most important play and will arrange for its production."—The Coburns.

"Your latest play (*The Hand of the Potter*) is wonderful and deserves to live forever. There was nothing wrong with the hand of the Potter when he made you."—D. M. S.

"It is a very interesting, tense and powerful analytical study of life in the raw, and I would like to see it played on the New York stage. It would, no doubt, create more discussion than 'John Ferguson'."—H. W. Gregg.

"It is with felicity and admiration that I call you playwright. You have earned that title fully and enduringly with *The Hand of the Potter*. I can see now why it abashed the critics and horrified the Comstockians, poor feeble insects who become all flustered at the least breath of life. They want their tragedies always saccharinized and dressed in pretty gowns of illusion, with a ribbon of shallow optimism gracing the middle. But, you, true surgeon that you are, have done your job as the case demanded, and I, for one, am glad you used so little of the anaesthetic. Is that why most of the reading public are screaming with pain?"—Symon Gould.

"I believe I told you that most of my business consists of rare and out of print books, yet I have sold twenty of the regular copies of 'The Hand of the Potter,' and I have ordered two of the autographed edition. Almost all the purchasers have told me how well they enjoyed the book and have admired the wonderful craftsmanship. One lawyer in particular told me that the trial scene was absolutely perfect in every detail. Personally, I think the shoulder jerking infinitely better than any spoken lines. The Jewish setting was admirably chosen, and except for one or two slight errors in Jewish expression, which super-Jewish critics have brought to my attention, I think the play is flawless."—Alfred H. Goldsmith.

"I read *The Hand of the Potter* last night. It is a very powerful play—dramatically constructed. I don't like the title. It suggests an extended, anthropomorphic hand. Isadore was just a plant wrongly crossed, bitten by a green worm or something else happened to him in the pollination. You might have found in 'De Vires' a title better indicating the inherent, inevitable working of cell and sap. The play is of the first water."—Edgar Lee Masters.

"I think I am fairly familiar with the modern drama of these United States, and I know of no play by an American which achieves the greatness approached by this tragedy of yours. Its simple craftsmanship, the huge terror of its honest situations, the dialogue denuded of all nonessentials, its unforgettable substance—all these mark *The Hand of the Potter* as perhaps the most signal achievement in the American drama."—Arnold M. Rosenthal.

"Last night I completed *The Hand of the Potter*, and as an editor, this is what I thought: 'Why do newspapers employ pea brained critics to essay judgment of a work like this and so fill their columns with slush?' Are there no critics on our major newspapers even who know anything at all? I read the play and then the criticisms and judge that newspapers deal only with moraic trash fit only for mass consumption. If this play cannot be staged, it proves but one thing—and one thing only—that the mass of the people do not care to meet up with life as it is lived, especially by the very poor. If it were about kings and queens it might be different."—Charles E. Yost.

"Someone with the necessary taste and force may or at least should be found to produce *The Hand of the Potter*. It seems pitiful and paltry that Americans of the necessary mentality to enjoy so great a tragedy, drawn from their own life and their great metropolis, should not have a chance to see it. The very haunting figure of the old father, the swiftness of the language and action—the kind of stark splendor that envelops the play would hold and fascinate an audience, veiling its terror. I for one congratulate myself on my luck in being able to read it in book form."—D. D. H.

"I say again, as I did when I first read the manuscript, that the play is a great piece of dramatic writing, a stirring piece of dramatic art. Every character is well rounded—each a solid creation—all live out their destinies in accordance with their instincts and their restraints. I admire it greatly. It is not too much to say I think it is one of the greatest plays that has appeared in our day anywhere."—M. S. Y.

"I see no good reason why *The Hand of the Potter* should not be produced. In fact, I hold the firm belief that sooner or later someone is going to sense the dramatic possibilities of this stupendous creation and present the play to the public. Before the war there might have been this excuse, namely, the fear of shocking the mass. After the horror of the world war, what validity can that have?"—F. B.

"*The Nation*, in reviewing your, *The Hand of the Potter*, which review caused me to read the play, speaks of Isadore as 'important.' Certainly Isadore is important—a large and grave problem. As is well within your right, you leave the problem unsolved, and perhaps there is no solution. As a physician, I wish there were. But at least you ring down the curtain on a magnificent climax. The father's cry at the very end, 'Why pull at the walls of my house? They are already down,' will, I believe, join the classics—that heaven of those super-creations of the writers of the world."—Stephen B. Hylbourn.



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